

Impacts of Racism during Childhood

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Abstract

This article brings the main results of a qualitative research on the effects of racism on child subjectivity. A cartography of eight body drawings of children five to eleven years old was carried out. From the cartographic method, two children's graphic narratives were analyzed, comprising them as part of a historical and collective process where we can perceive racism and more specifically the politics of whitening as contemporary vectors that affect subjectivity.

Introduction

This article brings the main results of a qualitative research in critical social psychology, which took place in Brazil, a large country in South America. This is a country whose population is composed of indigenous people, Black Brazilians of African ancestry and white Brazilians of Portuguese colonizers' ancestry. Brazil also has a very mixed population; like most colonized countries, this is the result of the so-called "miscegenation". Around 56% of Brazilians identify as Black-the largest population of African descent outside of Africa. Racism is persistent and violent in the country, both in subtle and explicit ways, built as a structure that moves across relationships and social institutions. The structural racism is the normalization of political, economic, and legal practices that generate social disadvantages that specifically affect racial groups since the period of colonial expansion [1] and in Brazil, severely damages indigenous and Black Brazilians. Concrete data on social inequality show that racism is a dimension that cannot be reduced to poverty. Large portions of the Brazilian Black population live in places with low living conditions, struggling to access good education, health, sanitation, work opportunities, cultural and leisure means. From concrete data on social inequality, as historical knowledge of the most oppressive aspects and of the possibility of "whitening" the body and culture to survive [2], it is possible to affirm that racism interferes negatively in the health of the Black population, which is the focus of this study. This damage begins at childhood [3,4,5], with a racist socialization, lived in family structures and at school [6]. Racism and the fallacious idea of race, built in the nineteenth century, still are in the modes of subjectivation of white individuals; "being white" determines moral, intellectual and aesthetic characteristics for them, with consequences for the black ones [7]. It is important to say that the idea that originated this study about racial relations and whiteness came from a school psychologist with data confirmed by other professionals in the field of education that saw Brown and Black children portraying themselves and their colleagues as white, blonde and blue eyed, such as the picture on the left. It is as if the pictures on the left were reality when the real children were much more similar to those on the right (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Pictures on the left were reality when the real children were much more similar to those on the right.

The history of colonial oppression and historical and current racism might go a long way to explain why Black Brazilians were-and still are-pressured to be or look white. "Whitening", which is part of the racial logic, is one of the effects on the subjective reality of the Black (and non-Black) population in contemporary times.

Method

Children to draw, paint, play; their primary to express themselves is through movement, color and creation itself. One understands drawing as part of a graphical discourse of experiences, a narrative in itself, a self narrative through graphic experiences. Narrating themselves through a drawing, each child tells not an individualized story, but a collective and contemporary one, which approaches the production of a social context, where their subjective constitution is built. Therefore the researchers Maia & Zamora [8] created a qualitative method called "Cartographic Analysis of Narrative through Graphic Design" and applied it to Black children of around five to eleven years old, all of them patients of the psychological clinic of a University. This method is based on the cartographic thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari [9] and developed by Escóssia, Passos and Kastrup [10]. Children draw, paint and play: movement is their expression, their way to create themselves, experiencing the world. This production cannot be dissociated from the social and historical context they live in. However, an modern, adult-focused and scientific way, the relationship with children's drawings is one of meaning, interpretation and overinterpretation. What is proposed by cartography is to break with representations and interpretations

(as in “when a child draws a certain thing it unavoidably means something else”) of children’s drawings; to put oneself beyond the binary concepts of cause and effect. Being a cartographer is an epistemological and political position, because its bases are in the deconstruction of a hierarchy, a place of power and domination of the researcher, as well as the idea of neutrality. The researcher follows the process developed by the research and is also implicated in such [11]. The instrument shows subjectivity as a social construction - in this case, emphasizing the various damaging aspects of racism, but has no intention of doing psychological diagnosis or generalizing its results.

Instruments

A box of crayons was used, with about ten possible human skin tones, a drawing with a child’s silhouette and pictures of children with five skintones, from very light to dark, taken from the internet. A digital photograph was taken at the end of every meeting with the children and the researcher or the research team, for a more complete data registry.

Procedure

The intern responsible for the child’s psychological care mediated the meetings, explaining to the responsible parties that this was part of a research about childhood experiences of anti-Black racism, and those who agreed to participate were booked as part of the research. During the meeting with the responsible parties, it was once again explained what the research entailed and what would take place next. Before the child was taken to the meeting room, they were asked to sign a free and informed consent term and the child was asked if they would like to participate. Afterwards, the child was given a drawing outlining a child, which should be painted with watercolor pencils. In this drawing, the child would paint themselves, and it was crucial that they could choose which crayon would paint their skin tone in the drawing before getting started in the details. All said by the child during the meeting was considered to be important and written down later. This narrative composed the data analysis.

Results

For this article, the drawings of two boys were chosen, which were briefly seen before. These are Igor and Caio, names attributed to them by the team, and they are ten and eight years old, respectively. Igor was taken to SPA [Psychological care clinic] due to school racism and struggled to attend classes, as well as low-self esteem and difficulties in processing his parents divorce, according to his therapist. During the meeting, Igor self-identified as black, choosing the image of the darkest skinned child and seemed at ease choosing the crayon with the skin tone closest to his skin tone. According to his therapist, Igor experienced racism at school, but he did not talk about this issue and instead talked about the stories told by his teacher. When asked what he likes to do at school, he said he enjoyed History classes, that he takes ceramic classes and that his teacher at times makes a circle of African storytelling. Igor repeats a couple of times that he quite likes this “auntie”, his teacher. He drew a superhero with dark skin and a special outfit and a star, a symbol of strength (Figure 2).

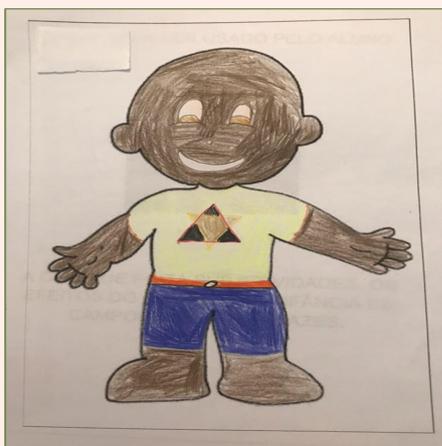


Figure 2: He drew a superhero with dark skin and a special outfit and a star, a symbol of strength.

Caio, eight years old, asked to read parts of the free and informed consent document, as a way to show his reading skills. Choosing the water color pencil that most resembled his skin tone, he chose brown, then asked for a pencil to draw his face, and began drawing his hair, which was colored blonde. Later he painted the body neck down in brown and chose pink to finish the face (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Later he painted the body neck down in brown and chose pink to finish the face.

In the end, he asked to take the picture of the boy with the lightest skin tone home. This was also the picture he chose to self-identify as, and asked it clutching the photo to his chest. Caio named each boy in pictures after a footballer. When asked which one played football best, he chose the lightest skinned one (Figure 4).



Figure 4: He hid his face behind the light skin child photo. Caio has a dark skin tone.

In his narrative he told us he lived in a gun violent favela though “not anymore”. Later he said he does live there, but that there are no more criminals around. His picture at the end of the process can be shown here, as he hid his face behind the light skin child photo. Caio has a dark skin tone.



Discussion

Despite the expansion in research about the effects of racism on Black childhood, there is a need for more production on the theme [5,12,13]. Recent research shows the effects of racism in the health of the Black population, connecting racism to poverty, violence and physical and mental illness [12]. In USA, recent literature on racial disparities and systemic [structural] racism has documented how racism deeply affects children and families [14]. Blake, Epstein & Gonzáles [15] show that adults of many ages, different education levels and professions, consider Black girls as more independent, needing less protection and knowing more about sex than white girls. They are treated differently and suffer a type of violence that suppresses their childhood, denying their age appropriate needs (5-14 years old). Brazilian racism might produce very similar effects to the ones identified by the previously mentioned authors, or maybe even worse ones. In Brazil, there has been 60000 murders in 2018 and about 45000 in 2021 - with always over 70% of the dead are Black Brazilians. Most of the Black population lives in places with bad life conditions, find it difficult to access good education, sanitation, work opportunities, with the added factor of geographical isolation. Cruz and Guariento [16] point to evidences of State violence against the Brazilian Black population in data such as: the poorest population is majority Black, 64% of inmates are Black, the suffering and death rates among Black women giving birth is highly alarming, femicide overwhelmingly impacts Black women, and the amount of Black students in universities has grown, but it is still much lower than the amount of White Brazilians. Racial segregation is easily identified but not called that. Frantz Fanon [17] a Martinican psychiatrist and radical anti-colonialist, understands racism as a consequence of the specific form of capitalist exploitation that was colonialism. It is part of the set of power strategies that act in the systematic oppression of the people: "To those who are Black, there is only one exit door, which leads to the white world. From which stems the constant concern about white attention (...), the wish to be powerful like whiteness allows, this desire to acquire certain protective properties, which is to say, parts of the being and owning that is a part of the construction of an ego (...)",

How can one understand the white self-portraits made by white children such as Caio?

The black subject in Souza's reflection [18], "is born and raised immersed in an ideology that imposes whiteness as an ideal and endorses the struggle to follow this model" (p. 34). Whiteness is a beauty standard, a keeper of knowledge, powerful and respected. Which is to say that the racist colonizing effects of whiteness still produces suffering, through its dominion over the interstices of subjectivity and interferes in a negative manner in the constitution of black children. To build an ideal around the white image, black children are imposed their own rejection.

How can Caio be black, if being black is seen and treated as a target in their own country? How would one avoid putting on a protective "white mask", which might grant him at least the right to life, among criminals, gunshots, poverty and all sorts of threats?

In our analysis we point to the need to broaden and discuss the relationship between racism and the subjective construction of black childhood. With the intent to expand the studies about racism in childhood, we believe that research should also include white childhood. One of the tasks of psychology in deconstructing racism must be that of ignoring an alleged neutral status of white racial identity that leads to a big part of society possessing privilege but not perceiving them [19]. The drawings, gestures and narratives of these children tells us something about how it is like to grow up in a country where whiteness and whitening narratives are dominant. May growing up black be transformed as an experience, and we can all work towards a country that treats its people equally regardless of the color of their skin. This study sought to understand racism and bind psychology to the work of deconstructing its effects, though whiteness must continue to be studied; this should be done alongside blackness, in every sense. It is also necessary to think of Igor. The possibility to find his true history and the stories of his ancestry, family care, school, family and therapeutic care were his real answers, whitening was avoided and racism could be faced.

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